United Nations S/PV.6824

Security Council

Sixty-seventh year

Provisional

6824th meeting

Wednesday, 22 August 2012, 10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Araud	(France)
Members:	Azerbaijan	Mr. Musayev
	China	Mr. Wang Min
	Colombia	Mrs. Duarte
	Germany	Mr. Berger
	Guatemala	Mr. Rosenthal
	India	Mr. Kumar
	Morocco	Mr. Bouchaara
	Pakistan	Mr. Tarar
	Portugal	Mr. Cabral
	Russian Federation	Mr. Pankin
	South Africa	Mr. Sangqu
	Togo	Mr. Menan
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Parham
	United States of America	Mrs. DiCarlo

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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12-46802 (E)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in French*): Under rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Jeffrey Feltman, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I give the floor to Mr. Feltman.

Mr. Feltman: This is my first briefing to the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East. I look forward to working closely with the Council on these important issues.

As we approach the one-year mark since the Security Council was presented with the Palestinian application for membership in the United Nations, we must work to ensure that the occasion is used in a constructive manner to encourage progress towards meaningful dialogue. Last September, the Middle East Quartet put forward a framework for negotiations (see SG/2178) that required systematic progress on core issues. The Quartet envoys have remained in close contact with the parties and one another, including in Geneva on 14 August, in order to assess the situation and the Quartet's future steps. While direct exchanges have continued, in an effort to agree to terms that would create an environment conducive to talks, we are concerned that we have not yet seen the progress necessary for sustained negotiations that could lead to successful outcomes.

At the same time, Israeli and Palestinian Authority representatives have been meeting to identify ways to enhance Palestinian Authority revenue capture by reducing illegal trade and tax evasion. On 31 July Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and Israeli Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz signed an agreement. New measures include the introduction of advanced technologies aimed at improving monitoring of the flow of Palestinian imports through Israel, and the construction of pipelines for transferring petroleum products directly from Israeli ports. Implementation of the measures is expected to begin in January 2013. In another positive development, 6,000 new permits are expected to be approved for Palestinians to work in Israel, bringing the total to 30,500. These are welcome steps that follow others reported previously, and we encourage continued positive gestures.

The Ad Hoc Liaison Committee is expected to meet on 23 September in New York, just before the general debate. While in the short term the international community may not be in a position to succeed in helping the parties bridge their political differences, it is critical that all those countries that are committed to helping the Palestinians achieve their legitimate aspirations for statehood focus their attention now on addressing the difficult fiscal and economic situation of the Palestinian Authority. The United Nations has joined many countries in praising the institution-building efforts that the Palestinian Authority has undertaken in recent years under the leadership of President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad. Those who suffer from financial shortages in the Palestinian Authority are first and foremost the Palestinian people.

A central aspect of the Palestinian Authority's continuing fiscal crisis is a decrease in foreign aid and the failure of donor countries to fulfil financial pledges to the Palestinian Authority in a timely manner. As a result, the Palestinian Authority has faced difficulties in paying full salaries to its employees on time. The Ministry of Health has also launched an appeal for support in addressing a severe shortage of essential medicines and drugs at the central medical stores.

The fiscal crisis is being compounded by a decrease in economic activity. The first quarter of 2012 saw the economy contract by 3 per cent compared to the previous quarter, mainly due to slowdowns in construction and agriculture. Unemployment increased to 24 per cent. A recent World Bank report on Palestinian economic sustainability noted that reversing that negative economic trend will require greater efforts to enable economic activity throughout the West Bank and Gaza, including through a further easing of restrictions in order to allow the private sector to develop.

Private-sector-led economic growth is the key to decreasing the Palestinian Authority's dependence on foreign aid, as is slowing the growth of its spending. The World Bank highlighted the centrality of economic growth for Palestinian State-building; without it, State-building progress could be at increased risk. We repeat our urgent call on donors, particularly Gulf countries, to help tackle the Palestinian Authority's

deepening deficit problems. All countries that tirelessly promote the Palestinian cause in international forums will have an opportunity at the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee meeting to demonstrate in a tangible, practical way their support for the Palestinian people and for the institutions of a Palestinian State to enable them to thrive.

The reporting period witnessed continued settlement construction. On 12 August, Israeli authorities announced the approval of a housing project within the settlement of Maale Adumim, east of Jerusalem. A total of 150 housing units will be demolished and replaced by 750 new housing units. On 16 August, Israeli authorities published a tender for 130 housing units in the East Jerusalem settlement of Har Homa. As the Quartet has stated on numerous occasions, any Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank cannot prejudge the outcome of negotiations and will not be recognized by the international community. Any settlement construction in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, is contrary to international law and should be brought to a halt.

Operations by Israel security forces in the occupied West Bank declined this month. Citing security, there were 141 operations resulting in 116 Palestinians injured, including nine children and six women. Two Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers were injured by Palestinians. A total of 81 of the Palestinian injuries and many of the 123 arrests of Palestinians that took place during the reporting period occurred during demonstrations against the barrier, which deviates from the Green Line in contravention of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (see A/ES-10/273). The United Nations recalls that the right of peaceful protest must be upheld and that all protests should be kept strictly non-violent.

Cases of settler violence persisted, with 17 incidents that led to injuries or property damage, including an attack on 16 August in Hebron, when a molotov cocktail hit a Palestinian taxi, injuring six members of the same family. A Palestinian teenager from East Jerusalem was attacked and seriously injured by Israeli youth on 16 August. We note the condemnation of that attack by Prime Minister Netanyahu and senior Israeli officials. Such acts of violence are of serious concern, and Israeli authorities must work to prevent such incidents from recurring.

During the reporting period no displacement was recorded as a result of demolitions. However, a total of 13 structures supporting the livelihoods of people were demolished for lack of building permits. Additionally, orders were issued against dozens of other structures, including at least 24 stop-work, demolition and evacuation orders issued against structures, including residences, in the Jordan Valley area and the Hebron and Tubas governorates. Israeli authorities have further stated their intention to evict from their homes approximately 1,000 Palestinians living in the southern West Bank, as the area has been designated a "firing zone" for military training.

We continue to be concerned by the ongoing policy of demolitions and forced evictions implemented by the Israeli authorities in Area C and East Jerusalem, and we will pursue our dialogue with Israeli authorities in that respect. I am also worried about the continuous restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities on the provision of humanitarian access to Palestinian civilians affected by, or at risk of, demolitions and forced evictions in Area C of the West Bank. Since the beginning of 2011, the Israeli authorities have demolished a total of 162 items and structures in Area C that were funded by humanitarian donor countries, including temporary shelter assistance, water cisterns and animal sheds. Demolition orders have been issued, but not yet implemented, against 142 others. Additionally, since the beginning of 2012, there were at least 15 incidents in which relief items were confiscated by the Israeli authorities.

Four Palestinian prisoners in Israeli administrative detention continue to be on hunger strike. There are concerning reports that the detainees are being mistreated, while one of them is reportedly on his eighty-seventh day of a hunger strike. We call on the Israeli authorities and the detainees to find an agreement that would permit the immediate ending of their hunger strike and for the prisoners to be well treated, in line with international law.

As Muslims celebrated the month of Ramadan, restrictions remained on access to prayer at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Israeli authorities did, however, ease access for a large number of West Bank Palestinians to visit East Jerusalem and Israel, for example by lowering the age of those permitted to enter for prayers from 50 to 40 years of age.

Let me now turn to the serious events that took place on 5 August in the Sinai at the border with Israel. Terrorists attacked an Egyptian security post near Kerem

Shalom, killing 16 Egyptian border guards as they broke their Ramadan fast. The attackers subsequently breached the Israeli border, in what appears to have been an attempt to kill Israelis. Israeli security forces intercepted the attack, and Egyptian authorities have stepped up their efforts to prevent a recurrence of such attacks and to increase security in the Sinai.

The Secretary-General strongly condemned the terror attack. Coming nearly a year after a similar incident in the south Sinai that resulted in both Israeli and Egyptian deaths, that latest attack is a sobering reminder of the need for all of us to remain focused on maintaining and strengthening regional peace and security.

In a related development, Egyptian authorities immediately closed the Rafah crossing with Gaza following the 5 August attack as part of a security operation that also involved the dismantlement of a number of tunnels. In the meantime, the crossing has been periodically reopened to permit travel for humanitarian cases. The potential undue humanitarian impact of the developments in and around Gaza this month should be considered as well. Given the already difficult conditions of Gazans, the basic rights of the people of Gaza must be protected, including the ability to move in and out of Gaza for legitimate religious, educational, work, medical and other purposes, and to ensure the continued availability of basic living essentials, including for development. On 15 August, one Grad missile fired from the Sinai landed near Eilat, in southern Israel.

The events in the Sinai, as well as the continued rocket fire from Gaza, one Israeli air strike and five IDF incursions, underline the fragility of the situation in Gaza. The Israeli air strike took place on 5 August when the IDF targeted two alleged militants riding a motorbike in Rafah, killing one and injuring the other. A short escalation followed, which included the firing of mortars and Qassam missiles into the area of Kerem Shalom. One Palestinian civilian was injured during the IDF incursions. In all, 35 projectiles were shot from Gaza into Israel during the reporting period, including one Grad missile and other shorter-range projectiles. We strongly condemn the indiscriminate firing of missiles from the Gaza Strip. Israel must also show maximum restraint.

To revive the Gazan economy, restrictions related to the closure of the Gaza Strip have to be relaxed, allowing for trade between Gaza and the West Bank, Israel and other countries. As was noted in last month's briefing (see S/PV.6816), United Nations reconstruction work is having a positive, but short-term, impact on employment. We are working with the Government of Israel to approve United Nations projects on a regular basis: $360 million worth of projects has been approved, and projects worth $85 million are currently pending approval. We also continue to urge the Government of Israel to allow the unrestricted import of key building materials, in order to allow for the more effective implementation of reconstruction work in Gaza. It is worth noting that most of those materials continue to be readily available in the Gaza Strip from the illegal tunnel trade. The recent release of 20,000 tons of construction materials for the private sector in Gaza is a welcome move, and we encourage Israel to further ease the present restrictions. In addition, we urge donors to continue to fund United Nations reconstruction work in Gaza through the Palestinian Authority-United Nations Trust Fund.

Palestinian factions remain deadlocked on the way forward towards reconciliation, especially with regard to the implementation of previous agreements. The sequence of elections remains a central point of division. The Palestinian Central Elections Committee initiated a voter registry update in the West Bank from 5 to 9 August ahead of the local elections scheduled for 20 October 2012. We continue to support efforts to promote reconciliation through Egyptian auspices, under the leadership of President Abbas and within the framework of the commitments of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the positions of the Quartet and the Arab Peace Initiative.

The lack of unity is also having an impact on the Palestinian population. In one example, between 16 and 27 July, Gazan applications for outside medical treatment were not processed owing to a dispute between the de facto authorities in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority over the composition of the medical referrals committee. The dispute was resolved on 26 July thanks to efforts by civil society and professional health workers.

The Council discussed the situation in Syria at length on 16 August. My remarks will therefore be brief. As members know, as of midnight on 20 August, the United Nations Supervision Mission in the Syrian Arab Republic (UNSMIS) shifted to its liquidation phase. A limited number of UNSMIS staff remain in place to carry out that process. Last Friday, the

Secretaries-General of the United Nations and of the Arab League appointed Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi as their Joint Special Representative. He will be in New York later this week.

Regarding the situation on the ground, violence continues and, in some cases, has escalated. Both the Government and the opposition are focusing on military operations and the use of force, with Government forces using heavy weapons on population centres. The Syrian people are suffering grievously from the appalling further militarization of the conflict. The Secretary-General has repeatedly expressed his concern about the arms flows to the two parties in Syria, which in some cases appear to violate Council resolution 1747 (2007) banning arms exports under Chapter VII authority.

We view the rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation with growing alarm. About 2.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, while the number of displaced persons in Syria and the refugee flows to neighbouring countries are growing. During her recent visit to Syria, the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos, noted the heroic efforts being made by humanitarian relief organizations on the ground, but she also identified access and growing capacity limitations. She called on the Government of Syria to open greater humanitarian access and to widen the scope of the organizations with which the United Nations and others can partner to deliver relief to those in need.

The Secretary-General also reinforces Ms. Amos's urgent call for a greater and more rapid response to the United Nations humanitarian appeal for Syria. The revised Syria refugee response plan of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which sought almost $70 million for its humanitarian operations in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, remains 74 per cent underfunded. The United Nations calls for more donor support for the rapidly increasing population requiring assistance in Syria, as well as in the surrounding countries.

As the crisis in Syria continues to deteriorate, the situation in Lebanon has become more precarious and the need for continued international support to the Government and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) increasingly important. Cross-border shelling continued in northern and eastern Lebanon, causing several injuries. Tensions over domestic and security concerns remain high throughout the country and are easily exacerbated by developments in Syria. Clashes reignited on 21 August between the largely Sunni and Alawite communities of Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jebel Mohsen in Tripoli, resulting in at least six deaths and tens of injuries. The Secretary-General has repeatedly expressed his concern about two-way arms smuggling across the Syrian-Lebanese border, which poses risks to both countries and is in violation of resolution 1701 (2006).

On Wednesday, 15 August, dozens of Syrian nationals and a Turkish citizen were abducted by a Shia clan in Beirut in retaliation for the abduction earlier in the week of one of their family members in Syria. While a number of abductees have since been released, there have been reports of further kidnappings and threats by the clan targeting Syrian, Turkish, Saudi, Qatari and Emirati nationals, as well as reports of other clans engaging in similar activities in the Bekaa. On the same day, families of the 11 Lebanese Shia pilgrims kidnapped in May in Syria reacted to reports that their relatives had been injured in an attack by the Syrian Army in the region of Azaz in which the road to Beirut's international airport was blocked. The Government of Lebanon condemned those developments, called for restraint on all sides and established a security committee to follow up on those events. In his report to the General Assembly, the Secretary-General strongly condemned kidnapping and retaliatory hostage-taking in Syria and Lebanon, and called for the immediate release of all those detained without due process and in violation of their human rights.

On 9 August, Lebanese authorities arrested former Minister and Member of Parliament Michel Samaha for involvement in smuggling explosives from Syria, allegedly as part of a plot against targets inside Lebanon, with the supposed aim of provoking Sunni-Shia conflict. Two senior security officers are also being investigated for involvement in the same incident. Mr. Samaha's public alignment with positions of the Syrian Government has deepened concerns about attempts to draw Lebanon into regional events, despite President Sleiman's and Prime Minister Najib Mikati's careful policy of disassociating Lebanon from the Syrian crisis. The Secretary-General recently spoke with Prime Minister Mikati and remains focused on protecting Lebanon's stability and sovereignty.

Against that backdrop, Lebanon's national dialogue reconvened on 16 August, with discussions focused on a solution to the recent deterioration in

security. Reportedly because of growing security concerns, not all political leaders were able to attend the session. As stressed previously by the Council, the commitment of Lebanon's leaders to safeguarding the country's security and stability from regional events is important. The national dialogue is scheduled to reconvene on 20 September.

The situation in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) area of operations remained cautiously calm and stable. In close cooperation with the LAF, UNIFIL maintained an enhanced presence across its area of operations, as the LAF were operating at a decreased

strength owing to the temporary redeployment of some units to address security requirements in other parts of the country. Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace continued on an almost daily basis. In a letter dated 14 August, Lebanon informed the Security Council of engineering work undertaken by Israel on 16 July on the Blue Line in the vicinity of Mazra'at Fashkul in the Shaba'a farms area.

Despite the current stagnation in the negotiating process and the obstacles to be overcome, it is clear that the two-State solution remains the best available and most realistic option for the Israelis and Palestinians. It is the view of the United Nations that not only the parties themselves but all Member States have the responsibility to consider their actions and their language in the light of that goal. All Member States can ask themselves a simple question as to whether a certain course of action brings the Israelis and Palestinians closer to a two-State solution or makes that goal even harder to achieve in practice. Language that calls for the destruction of one of the parties is unacceptable and undermines the ability of the Palestinians to achieve their stated goal of an independent State living side by side in peace and security with Israel. The Secretary-General has been clear that all leaders in the region should use their voices at this time to lower, rather than escalate, tensions.

In conclusion, allow me to underscore that regional developments add urgency to the need to overcome the persisting stalemate in the Middle East peace process. The United Nations remains committed to work for a comprehensive resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the basis of Security Council resolutions, the Madrid principles, including land for peace, the road map, and the agreements previously reached between the parties. While prospects for peace seem to grow dimmer we, as the United Nations, continue to hope that leaders on both sides will recognize and seize the historic opportunity that is now before them to start seriously working towards the goal of reaching a peace agreement that meets the legitimate aspirations and fulfils the rights of the people on both sides.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Feltman for his briefing.

There are no further speakers inscribed on my list. I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion of the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.30 a.m.